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The Compassion Component

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The compassion component

A researcher uses client interaction videos to strengthen the communication skills of future veterinarians



He obviously had other places he wanted to be. Eyes downcast, the client flipped through a magazine, showing little interest in his conversation with the student veterinarian. All it took was the student sitting down and petting the dog for the client's body language to change. Turning toward the student, the client began to open up and share stories about his beloved pet.

These types of verbal and nonverbal communication skills are crucial to building rapport and showing compassion to clients, according to a Kansas State University researcher. McArthur Hafen, therapist and clinical instructor at the College of Veterinary Medicine, has been using video clips to increase the communication skills in third- and fourth-year veterinary students.

"Not many other veterinary medical schools are doing this," Hafen said. "The medical information our students receive tends to mainly focus on the biomedical, but adding in compassion and communication makes for a better experience for the veterinarian, the client and the pet."

Over several years and with client permission, Hafen has been videotaping selected client interactions. He found that reviewing these interactions allows students to enter into their veterinary careers with stronger communication skills and awareness.

Once clients agree to be videotaped, their initial interactions with the students are filmed during the pet health history review and physical exam. Then, students review the footage with Hafen, who completes a pretest.

McArthur Hafen



Lindsey Blevins and Mary Ellen Mathews



“We look for what they’re doing well and what they can work on,” he said. “By the third week, we film the students again with different clients and see how well they implemented the suggestions. Then I complete a post-test for each student.”

Hafen said he looks for how well students are connecting with their clients, including eye contact and where they position themselves relative to the clients. Additionally, he watches for whether a student is asking open-ended questions, being responsive and showing empathy when appropriate.

Reviewing and practicing their skills on tape helps the fourth-year students enter into their veterinary careers more prepared. Additionally, video clips from the interactions are used in a third-year communications course to demonstrate the importance of communicating with clients.

“The clips for the third-year students are designed based on trends we’ve discovered in our fourth-year research,” Hafen said. “We used to highlight the need for more eye contact. As third-year students have watched

the client interaction clips, it’s much less often we make that suggestion in their fourth year. It has given students a different point of entry for their final year.”

Among third-year students who rated themselves as having little interest in client communication, Hafen found that more than 50 percent rated themselves as moderately to very interested in these skills following their participation in the communication course.

“Clients want competence, but they also want compassionate care,” he said. “Once clients feel as though they’re not just another number, treatment adherence will improve. Having confidence in a veterinarian’s recommendations will help the animal.”

Hafen’s research with the fourth-year pretest and post-test will appear in the *Journal of Veterinary Medicine*. His research with the third-year video reviews is being submitted to the same journal.

By Megan Saunders, Communications and Marketing